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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN REUNIFICATION  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)  
SUBJECT: ROKG DOWNPLAYS "ABDUCTEE" INCIDENT AT INTER-KOREAN  
FAMILY REUNION EVENT

REF: SEOUL 821

Classified By: POL M/C JOSEPH Y. YUN. REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) In retaliation for statements by two ROK journalists that a North Korean participating in the latest North-South family reunions had been "abducted," DPRK officials on March 22 refused to allow 99 elderly South Korean participants to depart the venue for 10 hours. The two journalists were eventually forced to return to the ROK; in solidarity with their colleagues, the remaining 21 ROK journalists then also left. An official from the Ministry of Unification (MOU) told poloff on March 24 that the ROK did not believe the incident would adversely affect future rounds of family reunions, or North-South relations in general. Seoul viewed the mishap as a result of inexperience on the part of DPRK staff. Minister of Unification Lee Jong-seok expressed regret over the DPRK actions, and the ROK intends to discuss ways to prevent the reoccurrence of such incidents. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND  
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¶2. (U) South Korean journalists covering the March 20-25 inter-Korean family reunions at Mt. Geumgang in the DPRK described one of the North Korean participants, a South Korean fisherman who saw his wife for the first since being forcibly taken to the DPRK in 1969, as an "abductee" from the ROK. In retaliation, DPRK officials on March 22 delayed the departure of 99 elderly South Koreans from the reunion site at Mt. Geumgang by ten hours.

¶3. (U) North Korean officials subsequently protested the SBS and MBC reports, claiming the two journalists had been disrespectful of the DPRK regime and falsely accused it of a crime. They also confiscated taped footage from the two journalists and demanded they leave the Mt. Geumgang resort with the group of 99. The reporter from MBC was already scheduled to leave March 22, but the reporter from SBS was scheduled to cover the entire six-day event. Officials from both Koreas met to resolve the situation but could not reach a compromise until SBS decided to pull its reporter out of North Korea. The reunion resumed on March 23 with the

arrival of the second group of 436 South Korean relatives of 100 North Korean families.

¶4. (U) On March 23, the 21 remaining members of the press corps withdrew to protest the DPRK's interference with their freedom of expression. According to media reports, journalists also complained that ROK officials had urged them to refrain from referring to North Korean participants in the reunions as having been "abducted" or "kidnapped." Minister of Unification Lee Jong-seok, however, expressed regret over the DPRK actions; according to media reports, Lee said "this kind of attitude from the North is neither helpful to improving inter-Korean relations nor in line with humanitarian spirit" and urged Pyongyang to rectify the situation.

#### UNIFICATION MINISTRY ATTRIBUTES INCIDENT TO NEW STAFF

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¶5. (C) Director Kim Hyung Suk of the Policy Agenda Management Team, Ministry of Unification, told poloff on March 24 that MOU assessed that the mishap was the result of inexperience on the part of North Korean staff, as well as the two South Korean journalists. Noting that problems between DPRK officials and ROK media had occurred in previous family reunions, Kim said the North Korean officials involved in the controversy had never had an assignment to inter-Korean family reunions, nor had they previously interacted with South Korean journalists. Whereas more experienced staff would have simply issued stern warnings and settled the issue more discreetly, the neophytes "went strictly by the books" and reacted sensitively per instructions. The fact that the reporters -- who covered inter-Korean affairs for the first time -- expressed outrage

and demanded freedom of the press increased tensions as well.

#### INCIDENT UNLIKELY TO STALL FUTURE REUNIONS, N-S RELATIONS

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¶6. (C) Kim downplayed the significance of the event, asserting that future rounds of family reunions and other projects between the two Koreas would not be adversely affected. He was also confident that the recently postponed inter-Korean ministerial talks (reftel) would resume in April. Minister of Unification Lee Jong-seok would, however, raise the issue with his North Korean counterpart during the ministerial and discuss ways to prevent similar fiascos.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Our MOU contact's explanation is, of course, an understatement. Officially, the DPRK denies there are any South Korean abductees or POWs; rather, there may be a few "missing" persons. For the large segment of population in South Korea, this is just one more in a long series of similar North Korean shenanigans. Still, for Lee Jong-seok, this is the first such incident since becoming the ROKG's point man for North Korean affairs. His action will be carefully monitored over the next few days as South Koreans gauge how far Lee will go to mollify the North Koreans. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW